

HIGH SCHOOL YOUNG AUTHORS PROGRAM ANTHOLOGY



State of Maryland
International Reading Association Council
Thirty-eighth Annual Conference

April 14 – 16, 2010
The Marriot Hunt Valley Inn



YOUNG AUTHORS OF MARYLAND HIGH SCHOOL CONTEST ANTHOLOGY

Award Winners Presentation Reception
April 14, 2010

State of Maryland
International Reading Association Council
Conference
Marriott Hunt Valley Inn
Hunt Valley, Maryland

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It has been our pleasure to serve as chairpersons for the sixth year of the SoMIRAC High School Young Authors Program. Our thanks to Past President Jim Newkirk for initiating the expansion of the Young Authors Program to include high school students, and to past and current presidents for supporting this continuing effort. We are proud to present this anthology of the best of the many essays/short stories and poems submitted by high school students from across the state in 2009-10. On behalf of SoMIRAC, we would like to extend special thanks to the teachers of these students for providing them with the instruction and resources needed to produce the exemplary pieces of writing in this anthology, and to the parents of these exceptional young men and women for nurturing their children's cognitive and creative growth as readers and writers.

We extend sincere appreciation to all of the local HSYAP chairpersons who, together with their committees, gave unselfishly of their time to read and judge the large number of local entries, and to the educators who volunteered their valuable time to select the winners at the state level. We thank the local council presidents for their support of this program, as well. Our gratitude goes to the industrious educators from the following SoMIRAC local councils for implementing this program and submitting entries for the 2009-10 HSYAP contest: Anne Arundel County, Baltimore County, Carroll County, Cecil County, Eastern Shore, Harford County, Mid-Shore, Prince George's County, Southern Maryland, and Upper Shore. We are confident that with continued support from these and other Maryland reading councils the SoMIRAC High School Young Authors Program will continue to expand and serve as a source of motivation for Maryland's young writers to publish and share their talents. We admire and appreciate the dedication of these fine educators to the students of Maryland's schools!

We are grateful to Joe Lenza of Permaabound for the donation of books for each of our winning authors over the past six years. Our thanks again to Barnes and Noble for contributing a gift card for one of our second place winners. Gratitude and special recognition is due to Brad Land, owner of Gallery Graphics, for printing this and the past five years' anthologies of winning short stories, essays and poems at a reduced cost. Additionally, this year we are publishing the anthology on the SoMIRAC website (www.somirac.org.) We encourage the high school young authors, their family, teachers, and classmates to access the website, share and enjoy reading and rereading these pieces long after today's event.

Sharon Burcham and Maureen Sengstack

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POETRY FIRST PLACE WINNERS



once upon a june: bench-side stories

one

there is a bench on the edge of my property.
it is the place where we used to spend our
summer eves – smack dab in the middle of a
mosquito swarm's territory,
and the humidity weighed us down and we
couldn't crawl back to safety because the
droplets in the air
swirled around us and sucked us into a tempest
as we
lay stranded on the
washed out wooden planks, but we smiled
through the bites and the swollen red
fingers as she tried to play her funny little
harmonica,
and we giggled right along
with the strangled hum.

two

there is a bench at the edge of my property.
it is the place where we lay huddled behind the
bushes to spy on the neighbors with
my newly inherited kaleidoscope that drew the
world
in truncated icosahedrons and snub cubes
as we slurped on too sweet lemonade
that made our throats sore, but we
turned the cups upside down and
gaspd in every trickle, and the boys played
baseball beyond the fence so we swooned
and scrambled to be the first
to stand on the seat to watch, but
the boards cracked and the wood splintered
under us so we cried right along
with the neighbors' hoarse shouts.

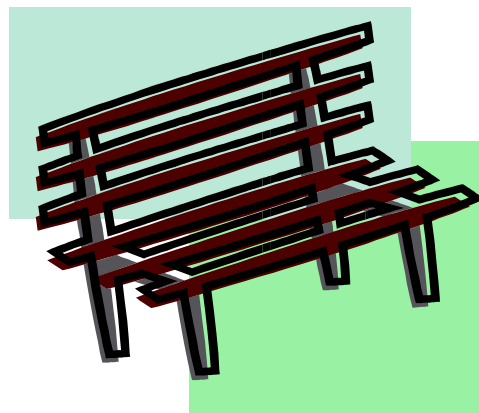
three

there is a bench on the edge of my property.
it is the place where we collect firewood for
the winter chills, when the sunlight
melts and seeps into the
absorbent earth and
freezes the grass flaxen, so the
snowflakes hurriedly put it to bed,
thinking it's just a little bit tired, that's all –

and we smiled forlornly at the planks,
envisioning
what it once was and what it could have been
if the boys had just moved away a bit sooner,
but dada calls for more
wood so we suck in a mouthful of
frozen breath and lug the limbs away,
feebly murmuring right along
with the red bird's funeral march.

four

there is a bench at the edge of my property.
it is the place where we sit gingerly,
awkwardly now, the new metal armrests a
foreign
black iron, melded into broken dreams and
fishing poles, and the wooden boards are
polished,
stained a useless mahogany that
squeals as we slide onto the curb
and perch there, looking at it and the birds
and the half-trimmed lawn and at everything
but each other, remembering aged debates
that were held here, hands that first
touched here, friendships that built
and died here, and
giggles that reached a high here -
but we remain hushed now,
breathing unsteadily right along
with the lawnmower's buzz.



five

there is a bench on the edge of my property.
it is the place where memories are revamped,
and we laugh about once upon a june
bench-side stories,
about embarrassing mosquito bites,
explosions in the pool, and gossip
under the gnarly pear tree, while we
held disgustingly healthy wheat sandwiches
that we mock gagged at – then laughed and ate
anyways,

because momma was waving her wrinkled
soapy
fingers and we loved the way she loved that
we loved her, so we
camped out in the swaying, unruly grass
that became a plain in southern africa again,
and we exchanged forgotten rumors which
once
would have made us heated, and
we whispered right along
with the fluttering laundry.



AYSHA KAHN

Grade 9

Jodi Wicks, Teacher

Dulaney High School

Baltimore County Reading Council

A Thousand Sides of the Same Coin

I am an untouchable holy man,
the black sheep of the Pagans,
a lover of social animals.
Pathologically unpredictable,
I dance as if everyone is watching.
I've got more cents than a decillion dollar bill.
A calculator in a class on Random Matrices,
I never turn off.
I'm an OCD guy painting MC Escher.
I am the far right, the far left,
the far sight, The Far Side.
I'm your best friend disguised
as your worst nightmare.
I am the daydreamer, the poet,
the logician, the mathematician,
a magician.
I am the man in the straightjacket,
calling *you* crazy, with you
believing every word.
I am The Walrus,
I am The Taxman,
I am The Eggman,
I'm Nowhere, Man.
I'm a Molotov cocktail on the rocks.
I see the world through 3-D glasses,
exploding and scorching
and burning the streets.
Who cares for me? I'm nothing
but a pack of cards--
a stacked deck with a side
of loaded dice.
I am the face card of every suit--
a Jack Of All Trades,
the Club and the Spade,
the King of Hearts, without his Queen.
So shuffle me, deal me,
the chips are down, all bets are in.
But before you make that final wager,
lady, remember:
this house always wins.



JUSTIN MCGUIRE
Grade 10
William Jones, Teacher
Towson High School
Baltimore County Reading Council

The Season Changed

The winter sun makes but a feeble attempt to mimic its summer splendor;
Yet it shivers in the gusty breeze and loses concentration.
The beach is now nothing but a lonely, windswept landscape.
The sun-bathers, swimmers, and frisbee-tossers long gone—
Packed up their bags and headed home.

No one anxiously awaits the forecast, praying for a beautiful day;
Only the seagulls are around to enjoy the blessings of sparkling cloudless skies.
Bare feet no longer dare to brave the sand;
Instead they cower in thick socks and shoes,
In far away homes with crackling fireplaces and snug carpets.

Now, even the most intricate orphan shells have slim chances of being adopted,
As children rarely visit the wave lines to fill their pockets.
Endless storms sneak up to thrust out to sea the sands that cannot hold on tight,
And what was once wide and thriving is now robbed and forced to shrink.
The trillion grains of sand tightly huddle together to keep warm.

But the summer memories live on,
In stories told, in colorful scrapbooks, in photos, in laughter,
In the bright bikinis tucked in the bottoms of drawers,
And in the grains of sand secretly hiding in sunglasses, flip flops, and summer bags.

Earth methodically continues its rotation, oblivious to the profound effect it has
On its own tiny beaches.
For now, the sands are stuck remembering what used to be,
Before the season changed,

And await next year.
It will all begin again.

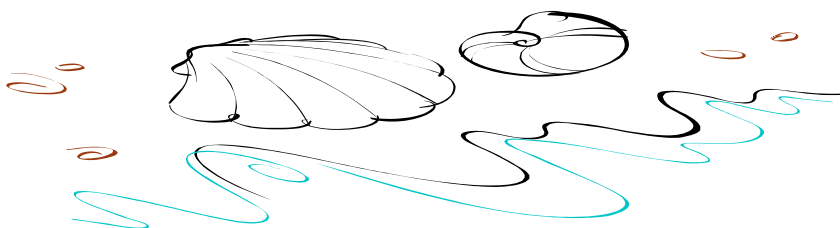
ALI SCHWARTZ

Grade 11

Merle Marsh, Teacher

Worcester Preparatory School

Eastern Shore Reading Council



Second Chance

Have you ever asked yourself
About the day you die?
If farewells were prepared
Or you never get a good-bye.
Will it be painful
Or will you go quick?
Death from an accident
Or by becoming very sick.

And who will be attending
Your exit from life?
Who shall bear your casket:
A husband or a wife?
What will people say
About you when you leave?
Will they remember your failures
Or the things you achieve?

When the book closes,
And the last chapter is done,
Was your life worth living
Or was it all spent on fun?
Would you do it all again
Given another chance?
Or would you have made a change
Before superficial romance?

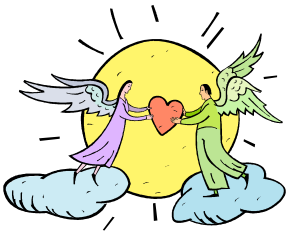
The day your spirit
Retreats to the unknown,
Where will you wander?
Will you be alone?
What if it was too late
For the truth, you knew too well.
That everything was in vain,
And you ended up in hell?

The things that you did
Appear in a different light
If you could take it all back
Or reverse one bad night.
And with this second chance
Would your goals have changed?
Suddenly, life is precious,
And your values are rearranged.

Would you take that offer?
Decline that deal?
Said those awful words,
Or given that appeal?
What will your tombstone read?
Portraying that unused cash?
Your life summarized by the numbers
Instead of by the dash.

Then you look in the mirror
And you realize you're not so great.
Your flaws seem unavoidable
You can't support the weight.
Given a second chance
You'd understand what they were saying:
"When life knocks you on your knees
You're in a perfect position for praying."

But in this imperfect world
We don't get another try
At a life we wish we had
After we begin to die.
It may be best to live wisely
And fight through the strife,
Because we don't get second chances
To live another life.



C. B. PEIRCE
Grade 12
Dana Kelly, Teacher
Rising Sun High School
Cecil County Reading Council



POETRY

Second Place Winners



Survive

Different people have different ideas,
Of what strength is, how it works,
Blond hair, blue eyes, upon a white steed,
A golden warrior in battle, taking the lead.

For me it means not,
To be a leader or to stand out.
For me it is to withstand all
Life's blows, and stand tall.

A death, a divorce,
The end of a love,
Depressions and grief
Guilt, without relief

At different times, in different places,
Those of us with different faces,
Have been dealt these blows,
Have fought these foes.

Some of us have fallen,
Unable to stand the pain.
Despite this, I still keep looking,
And I see...

The mother of three,
But now of two,
Gathering the two near,
Despite heartbreak and loss.

I see the man standing tall,
Seeing his wife of 10 years,
Hand in hand with another,
And wishing them joy.

I see the child we each once were,
Almost knocked over by the waves of
realization,
That life isn't the glittering world of
wonder we once saw,
And standing back up, withstanding it all.

So for those of you close to breaking,
Remember this to stop your aching;
For every one that gives up,
There is one who stays strong,
Who stands back up,
Who gathers her strength,
And... Survives.



JORDAN HORROCKS
Grade 9
Shirley Faulkner, Teacher
Aberdeen High School Science and Math Academy
Harford County Reading Council

A Child Is Born

At twelve o'clock sharp, moonlit midnight,
in the movieland america of palm trees, greased
hair, gas stations, denim jackets—
three baby boys were born within half a second
and a thousand miles of each other.

Listen.

The first was born crosseyed,
with a plastic spoon stuck to his face.
Satirical, satirical, he grinned
and even his screaming was glib.
The nurse reached,
quavering,
grimacing, mincing,
to pull the spoon off.
His mother shielded him with trembling hands,
her big brown eyes swimming in painkillers and
agony alive:
she said,
How dare you!
How dare you!
He will be great!
He will be *famous*!
How dare you!

The second was born
with a blue ribbon pinned to his chest:
he smiled like a thousand suns
as he clambered into the world.
The doctors and nurses wondered at him,
eyes and fingers probing.
His mother was delighted
and dandled him on her sweaty sheets:
the doctors, nurses, and assorted bystanders
pulled him away to keep his little body safe
from the menaces of safety pin on newborn skin,
and she howled like the damned,



spit dripping from her gums:
How dare you!
How dare you!
He will be more than you will ever be!
He will be president of america!
He will be president of the world!
How dare you!

The third baby was born
tattooed with the wings of either
A: an angel
or
B: an eagle
depending on which you loved more:
god or america?
He hurtled out,
250 miles an hour,
manic look in his baby eyes,
and crashed:
died on impact.
His mother looked at the ceiling
and whispered:
how dare you?
Nothing answered back, of course,
except the humclicketyclack of the fan.

People say america has no myths.
They're lying.
America *is* a myth,
and the real america is at least two decades ago
always.
Birth, death, liquid nitrogen and diesel fuel,
factory smoke and the shadowy colors of the tv
against the wall,
grit, stubble, lights of the big city, lights of the
small town,
And unto us, every few seconds,
a child is born.

REBECCA SLADE
Grade 10
Jason Taylor, Teacher
Bel Air High School
Harford County Reading Council



Child of Never

On September 22nd, 3:35 p.m,
in a dusty, air-conditioned room,
the man was never born.

He never slid to see the light,
a glistening yellow, flashlight beam

somewhere, sometime, a woman
(a girl, really)
sobbed- *imagining*- a baby's face,
with light brown skin and
brown eyes *a flash of green*,
short, curly jet-black hair,
(all of it quite irrelevant
the child was hardly real).

he never feels his first steps
across a camel-fur carpet
never giggled at the clown
on his second birthday,
never snickered at his brother's jokes.
or cried at the pokes

he was not at his own life, see,
didn't get carsick on a trip down south
never fidgeted at his grandfather's
funeral
nor cried when his pet catfish died.

he never came, shy,
to the first day of school
one trembling hand carrying a Spiderman
bag,

he never stuttered through second grade,
nor chattered, often, when it was fixed.
he never made the honor roll,
nor played soccer, and was pretty good.
he never whimpered when he broke his leg,
nor snuck his very first kiss
on a foggy Friday afternoon.

he never had dreams, without a mind,
didn't have arms and legs, really,
no more than amorphous blobs, anyway.

he never volunteered for Save the Whales
nor tried tobacco, and coughed it up.
he never got drunk, and drove too fast
crashed into a tree, and got grounded
three days before Prom Night.

he never found out,
the night before he turned
seventeen,
that he was adopted.

When he died, there was no funeral,
no gloriously false preaches,
or tearful friends, nervous kids.
there were no signs, flowers,
or even a simple stone.

because he was not born,
merely a few cells,
Chilling within an icy tomb,
Unreal, unborn, hardly a life.



LINCHUAN ZHANG
Grade 11
Danielle Sinclitico, Teacher
Eleanor Roosevelt High School
Prince George's County Reading Council



Raspberry Juice



Silver sunshine flits and weaves
Across the surface of the chain-link fence.
I climb over, careful to avoid any cuts
And I skip to my aging grandma.
She looks tired but stands strong,
As the wind playfully attempts to unsteady her.
The bushes behind her,
Agreeing to play along with the challenging wind,
Are decorated with red ornaments each filled with juice.
I gently shove my six year old hands into the fray
Of rollicking leaves,
And grab raspberries.
Too strong to know the difference
I burst the package of the jolly red fruit
And the juice spills into the dried rivers of my palms.
I watch as the blood of the dead berry,
Travels across the hills and valleys in my hand.
My grandma comes to me,
Softly grasps my hand, covered in the ornament's glass
And stains her palm with mine.
Forever filled with raspberry juice.



OLIVIA AIKINS
Grade 12
Sara DeMars, Teacher
Century High School
Carroll County Reading Council

Essay / Short Story First Place Winners



Golden



Destiny, in its most literal of terms, refers to a predetermined course of events- a future chosen for each individual by an unknown entity; a guiding force that exists to steer our world into the future we were always meant to have.

There are different kinds of destiny- the universal, in which society acts as a whole to create the paradise we strive for, and the personal- where an individual is destined in advance for the duties that will be eventually thrust upon him or her in the interest of the so called “big picture”.

But what happens to destiny when these two systems collide- when one individual whose life was never meant to be wasted dies for the sake of a dark, distant future?

I was never one for destiny. The human race created destiny in a feeble attempt to explain the random events of their lives- to explain why good people died for no reason while bad people went on living. They used it to justify war, rationalize genocide, and excuse the basic horrors that people impose on others time and time again.

I thought that believing in destiny meant that you had fallen into the trap for those who were too weak to accept reality as it is- cold and cruel and unfair.

But in a way, refusing to even consider the idea of destiny is just as weak- refusing to believe that you have no choice, no control, is a fate not many can accept.

Because that’s what it all comes down to- control. Control of life, love, power- they all lead to some level of madness. Justifying them to ourselves helps us accept them.

There are few people that honestly do not need that control.

I had the honor of knowing one of them. Her name was Emma. And she died after saving my life.

She was nothing to me, as blood relations go- I only knew her for a year, and we weren’t even especially good friends. Emma didn’t really have many good friends.

It makes me feel sick now. How many times did I pass her in the cafeteria while she sat alone, reading a book I would love, to go sit with the friends who would never hold a candle to her intelligence? How many times did I convince myself that they were better, even when I felt just as alienated as Emma among them?

When Emma got sick, it surprised me more than anything when I got the call from the hospital to go read to her.

I almost didn’t go that first time. But then I remembered the quiet intelligence in the golden, hazel eyes.

I went.

She had asked for me because I was in her English class. We’d once been assigned partners. She’d told me she liked the way I read. I thought it was nice. A little weird, but nice.

When I entered the room in the hospital that first night, I was struck by how incredibly clean everything was. Everything was lined up perfectly; every curtain, flower, and tissue box was flawlessly arranged.

Apparently, Emma was OCD. It took me by surprise at first- she’d always given me the impression of the go with the flow type- the type who wrote in sloppy cursive and sung under her breath and most definitely did not need to have her pencils arranged from shortest to longest or vice versa, depending on her mood.

But she was. And that was okay, because nobody was going to rearrange the stuff of a girl with terminal cancer, so she could keep her room just the way she liked.

The moment I came in, she sat straight up in her bed, her eyes wide. “I’m so sorry! I was delirious when they asked if I had anyone I wanted to come. You can leave. Really. I just remembered that you read the same things I do and you were good at reading and I guess I just said your name...” she babbled on, clearly expecting me to turn and walk out at any second.

I pulled out a copy of Harry Potter and began the first chapter.

She stopped mid sentence as I began to read aloud, and a small smile passed across her face.

So that was how it began.

We started a routine- every day I would come to the hospital and read a couple chapters of one of our favorite books. Then I would leave. It was a good arrangement- one that required little actual conversation. This went on for about a month.



When the little changes began to occur, I almost didn’t notice. Sometimes in the middle of the books she would stop me, ask me what I thought about that particular passage. I would tell her, and we might discuss it for a few minutes, but then I would continue, and after about an hour I would leave.

After a while, the hour became two, and that became three, and suddenly I was spending as much time in the hospital as I could.

I justified it to myself- after all, she could start slipping away any day now, and her parents were at work constantly to pay the medical bills. Somebody had to stay with her.

I wouldn’t admit that sometime over the two months of daily visits, she had somehow become my friend- maybe my only true one.

That was over summer break. When school started again, things changed.

It was my third year at high school, and I suddenly found myself with almost no friends. They had all abandoned the kid who spent enough time in the hospital to smell permanently like disinfectant.

One of the worst things a teenager can experience is being alone. The feeling of walking through a school of over two thousand students and knowing that none of them would really care if you suddenly keeled over and died was not a pleasant experience.

So when a kid approached me when I was walking home and asked if I smoked, I said yes.

I didn’t visit Emma that day, or the next. I was outside, far from home, trying not to cough and give myself away while I hung out with people who made me feel like I finally belonged again.

After nearly a month, I got a call from Emma’s parents. They said she missed me, and that they knew I was busy, but could I please try to find some time to stop by?

I deleted the message.

Three days later, my mom and me had a shouting match that made me storm out the door, grab the car keys, and drive.

I didn’t realize I was on the familiar road to the hospital until I was almost there.



When the nurse saw me, she looked at me for a few seconds, taking in my baggy clothes, the dark rings under my eyes, and the smell of smoke clear in the air.

“Here for Emma?”

I nodded once, uncertainly.

“This way...” she started, but I cut her off.

“I know the way.”

When I walked in, she looked up.

She looked terrible.

Her blonde hair was greasy and limp and tangled around her too thin shoulders. There were bags under her eyes to match mine, and the hand that lay still on her bed was as pale as death.

Her sharp golden eyes, however, remained the same. For a long time she just stared, and when she finally spoke, her voice was a rasp.

"I smell smoke," she said, and I broke down.

For a long time I just sat, having collapsed in the chair beside her bed, and cried. After a while a hand touched mine. It was as cold as ice.

I cried harder.

When I finally stopped, she didn't ask what had happened. She didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say. We were both contemplating the long month of silence that had crept between us and now made itself known, a giant wall in between us that I couldn't find a way to breach. I couldn't bring myself to look at her, and instead looked at the walls, where every picture was perfectly straight and every line perfectly drawn, because it would annoy Emma if it wasn't.

I found myself contemplating her disorder- the way she had to have the everything so perfectly under her control.

I wondered if it really was so weird,

The entire time I had known her, she had never once complained about her illness- had never once seemed frustrated at her lack of control over her own life. It seemed a contradiction to me. How could someone so bent on control and order not mind the chaos that had become her very existence?

But then, I mused, maybe there were different types of control. There were the little things, the things that Emma minded, like having an even number of peas on her plate and tapping each finger the same number of times on the table.

Then there were the big things, and this was where my own disorder came into play.

I couldn't control it when my dad left. I couldn't control it when my brother drowned at three. I couldn't control it when the friends I thought I had had for years left me on a dime because I wasn't interesting anymore. I couldn't control the person I was, dark places and shadowed thoughts and all.

Emma never had the desire for that kind of control. I admired her for that, and at the same time I envied it. She remained untarnished by the constant confusion and chaos that surrounded my own life by simply accepting things. She was optimistic, understanding, loving- golden in every way.

So when she thrust the copy of Harry Potter, the first book we had read, at me expectantly, the forgiveness clear in her eyes, I knew she meant it.



I took the book, and I read. I read for hours. Even when she had fallen asleep and the monitors were creeping down and doctors had come in and asked me to leave, I kept reading. Some part of me knew she was dying. The other part refused to believe that it could actually happen- that someone so good could die while I remained alive, with all my flaws.

The nurses had given up on asking me to leave. There was nothing they could do. They had called her parents, but they wouldn't be here for another hour, at least.

The doctors recorded the exact time she died- 2:32 am. I didn't leave until three. It took me until then to finish the book.

I drove home silently, and opened the door to my mother's hysterical crying. I went up to my room and threw the book on my bed, and then started on my homework for the first time in weeks.

I applied for community service at the hospital the next day, the same day I threw out every cigarette I had. I made friends there, talked, laughed, and fell in love there.

At her funeral I sat in the back and didn't speak, even though her parents asked me to. There was nothing I could say that anyone would understand.



Destiny can be cruel. It takes what we hold dear and either takes it or destroys it. But the very essence of destiny is supposed to be a comfort- a reassurance that things happen for the greater good, for the benefit of the community at large.

So when I find myself wondering why in the world my life was spared when hers wasn't, I still don't have an answer, because I still don't believe in destiny. How can I, when I was chosen over a girl with high hopes and a heart full of compassion? When I, the girl whose ambitions end with high school and whose soul is as dark and twisted as the characters in her favorite books, am alive when the girl with the golden smile and the clear hazel eyes is lying dead and gone, ready to be forgotten by those who never cared much in the first place?

What did I do to deserve the intervention of this girl at a turning point in my life that was heading for the worst?

The answer is: nothing. Fate doesn't work that way. Fate is different from destiny- nothing is predetermined, nothing is fair or universally beneficial, it just is. And when the cells in Emma's body started to work against her, well, nothing was meant to come out of that either.

But a lot of things did. Trust. Responsibility. Friendship.

So when I think of Emma, and her golden eyes and her shining soul, I can't help but feel guilty. Guilty that I was saved by her loss. And I would do anything to take it back- to exchange our places.

But even that means something. It means that Emma died with one person- even a person as undeserving as me- who honestly loved her. And part of me thinks, no matter whether it's true or not, that she would think that it was worth that.

Humanity is a funny thing. It's a double-edged sword- at once the best and worst things known to the universe. Being human grants a certain level of compassion- a love for others that can be unsurpassed.

But it also means greed. A hunger for power and control.

Most of us are a combination of the two- but we need certain people to bring them out. Emma was everything good for me- the essence of light when I needed it to guide me.

And even as she died, that light lived on, burning golden in the dark.



ANNA TAYMAN
Grade 9
Kimberly Brookshire, Teacher
South River High School
Anne Arundel County Reading Council

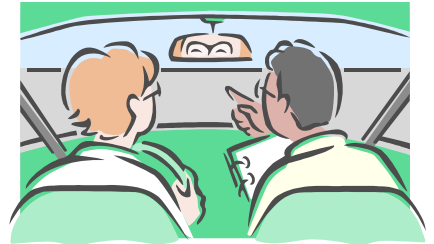
Warning: Student Driver



Butterflies swarm in my stomach as I walk out to the parking lot. The sun shines and a breeze causes a shower of orange leaves to fall from the nearby trees. I am feeling nervous and excited as I reach the tan car with the bright yellow stickers that read: STUDENT DRIVER. Today is my first driving session for driver's ed. Suddenly, I hear a very piercing giggle behind me, and I turn to find a cheerleader and a football player sauntering toward me. Haley Rayne, the cheerleader, is known as the most excitable and bubbly girl in the school, and I have never heard her be quiet for more than two minutes, even while taking a test. Matt Finn, the football player, thinks he is very athletic, very cool, and very good looking; however I personally have not seen any of these qualities. They stop at the car and look me up and down very indiscreetly. Suddenly out of nowhere, another boy appears by the car. This is Gareth Geoffrey. To say it plainly, he is a nerd. Glasses with transition lenses perched on his nose, he is frantically typing on a graphing calculator. I'm not sure he even notices our presence. An awkward silence follows his arrival, but Haley, of course, breaks the quiet.

"So I am like soooo excited to like drive aren't you? Cause it's like soooo cool to drive but I hope I'm not like bad at it, ya know? If I like fail then my life will be like ruined forever cause I really want to like drive and stuff it's so cool!" In her own special way Hayley puts basically what we are all feeling into words. Before the rest of us can comment, Haley continues to chatter, but my attention is drawn to a balding middle aged man approaching us. He is holding a clipboard and glances down at it while beginning to speak.

"I'm Mr. Humphrey, and I'll be your driving instructor. Are you Matt Finn, Gareth Geoffrey, Lauren Mason, and Haley Rayne?" We all nod. "Good. Who wants to go first?" Matt raises his hand. "Okay, the rest of you in the back." Matt eagerly jumps in the driver's seat while Gareth, Haley, and I sit in the back. Because our school has only one driver's education car, 300 sophomores, and 180 days, they fill the car to the capacity each session. Before I can buckle my seatbelt, Matt has started the car and is tearing out of the parking lot. Mr. Humphrey directs him to the back road where we will be practicing. Matt definitely loves to go really fast, but has trouble staying in the right lane. Weaving at seventy miles an hour, I feel sick to my stomach. I can tell Haley is scared also because she stops talking, and Gareth puts away his calculator. As Mr. Humphrey yells to slow down, I hear an explosion and the car jolts abruptly. Haley screams. Mr. Humphrey tells Matt to slow down, pull off to the side, and stop. Matt finally listens, and we come to a stop next to a corn field on a deserted road. Mr. Humphrey gets out of the car, walks around it, opens the door, and says:



"Well the tire blew out, so come on and I'll teach you how to change a tire." We get out and Mr. Humphrey demonstrates, with a few difficulties, how to change a tire. Afterwards, Mr. Humphrey decides Gareth should drive so we continue on at a safer speed. Gareth is a fair driver, but spends the entire time informing us of how friction, velocity, and inertia work while driving. It is way over my head, but Mr. Humphrey and I nod to be polite, while Haley and Matt flirt, not even pretending to pay attention.

After thirty minutes of “Newton’s Laws and Driving,” it is Haley’s turn to drive. She manages to drive, talk, and text all at the same time, but none of these she does well. Mr. Humphrey takes away her phone, but then she starts to motion wildly with her hands while talking. She also has a habit of slamming on the brakes when she gets excited, which is pretty often, so my head keeps hitting the seat in front of me. After another thirty minutes and a headache, we pull into a convenience store for a short break. When we get back to the car we find the doors are locked.



“Who has the key?” Mr. Humphrey asks. “Haley?”

“Uh, I don’t know like where it is.” Hayley replies. “I think I left it in like the car.” We peer in the window, and sure enough, the key is still in the ignition.

“Dude, isn’t there like OnStar to unlock your car?” Matt says.

“No, this car is too old.” Mr. Humphrey sighs, “What are we going to do?”

“A car lock works by sliding a bolt from an upright position in the door down at a 90 degree angle to latch onto the frame.” Gareth states matter of factly. “All you need is a thin piece of metal with a slight hook at the end.”

“Does anyone have a ‘thin piece of metal with a slight hook at the end’?” I ask.

“I believe I have a paperclip here in my pocket that I can bend into the proper shape.” Gareth replies. He takes out the longest paperclip I have ever seen, quickly bends it, and unlocks the door. Everyone thanks him profusely, and Mr. Humphrey buys him a soda. Finally, it is my turn to drive and I manage to get everyone back to the school in one piece, only mistaking the brake for the gas once.

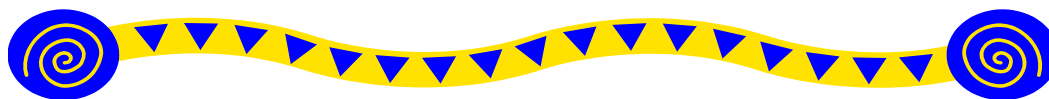
“Well, I can’t say I’ve ever taught a more adventurous driving session.” Mr. Humphrey says sounding relieved that we are finished.

“Omigosh! I know right I can’t wait for next week! I have to tell like all my friends!” Haley bounces away chattering to herself. Matt high-fives Mr. Humphrey and runs to football practice. Gareth has disappeared with his calculator.

“Well, it sure was an interesting group of people.” I say to myself as I walk back toward the school wondering if any of us will pass drivers ed.



MICHELLE STICKLER
Grade 10
Merle Marsh, Teacher
Worcester Preparatory School
Eastern Shore Reading Council



A Swapped Point of View

Part 1: Sabrina: “Sabrina, this poem...what are you trying to say in it?” asked my English teacher, Mrs. Gwennett, as I stood in front of her desk after the class had left. I knew what she was going to do...she *always* criticizes and underestimates me and my work. It's not that I hate her, even if she is a strict, serious teacher, but she just makes me feel...like I'm weak.

“Uh,” I stumbled to reply, “It's about how I view society... W-what's wrong with it?”

“Nothing dear, it's just that I think you can improve it by making *wiser* word choices.”

I sighed. *Why must she always complain?* I thought. “What's wrong with the way I write? Do you think I'm not good enough or something!?”

Mrs. Gwennett appeared shocked at my attitude. “Sabrina, I'm only saying that you need to improve yourself so that you can do higher-quality work.” She then opened her drawer and pulled out a mirror with African-stylized designs around it. She faced the glass towards me so I could see myself. “Tell me if you want to see yourself as a successful student or not.”

All I saw was a girl with a frown on her face. “I don't want to see anyone but myself,” I said, “and that poem represented much of what I am. You just don't understand me.”

Just when I was about to walk out, I glimpsed back in the mirror and gasped. Instead of seeing myself in the reflection, I saw the face of Mrs. Gwennett. I saw her look confused too, but the moment I looked back into the glass, I saw my own face again. My heart pounded, and a strange tingling went on inside my body.

“What is it?” she asked, with a slight worried look on her face.

“N-nothing,” I gulped. “I b-better go now...” And I scurried out of the room.



Part 2: Mrs. Gwennett: I was in my bedroom, folding the clothes that my husband, Arthur, brought for me. I was bewildered about Sabrina; I had no clue what frightened her, and why she over-reacted to my writing suggestions when they were for her own benefit. *What's hard about adjusting a poem?* I pulled my mirror out of my bag, and looked at myself with wonder. Suddenly with great surprise, my reflection transformed into Sabrina's, and I dropped it as if it were a hot kettle. My mouth hung open and I found myself bending backwards against my bed. I started to feel a tingling sensation within my flesh, and my mind went through a million thoughts about my job and the pains of my teaching life in milliseconds. Then I could comprehend nothing else.

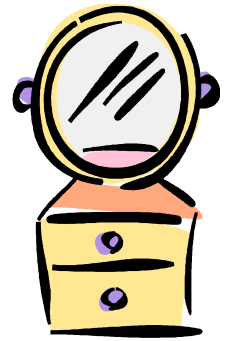


Part 3: Sabrina: I was in my room listening to pop songs on my iPod, hoping I would forget what happened in English. *Why does she have to be so strict? Why doesn't she let me have a little freedom!?* Suddenly, out of nowhere, my head started to hurt, and I became extremely dizzy. My bedroom seemed to be rotating, faster and faster, while familiar voices were entering my mind. They were voices of my gossiping friends and of Mrs. Gwennett. My eyes just wanted to fall out, but instead I fell on to my bed, and everything in my room dissolved into black...

Part 4: Mrs. Gwennett: I didn't know how long I've been unconscious. My head burned, and I managed to slowly open my eye lids. As my eyes started to adjust to the dark light, I gradually sat up, but nothing looked familiar; I could tell that the wall was painted red and that it was full of... *posters? Where... on earth... am I?* I pondered. I clutched my legs, but they didn't feel like mine... they were too

small. I stood up, and I wasn't as high as I hoped to be. I glimpsed a mirror at the far end of the room and immediately went over to it. I became speechless at what I saw.

Instead of myself, I saw Sabrina. I was both frightened and awestruck. With every facial expression, all I saw was what Sabrina would look like making the same expression. When I clutched my fingers, they were unbelievably smooth. I was her; a young woman. I took fast breaths, but then a thought came to me and I immediately searched for a phone of any kind. *I'm inside Sabrina's body*, I thought, *then she must be trapped in mine... in my house.* I found a cell phone, and immediately started dialing my home phone number.



Part 5: Sabrina: Waking up in the body of my teacher was definitely not on my list of things to do before I die. I just got out of bed in the dark, and felt how unusually large and wavy my hair was. After turning on the lights and finding myself in a fancy, beige bedroom with a queen-sized bed, I was face-to-face with Mrs. Gwennett's reflection in a large closet mirror.

I nearly screamed at my appearance. I was a 40-year old woman! I went to the bedroom door and peaked out of it, seeing if I really was not dreaming and not in my house. I nervously walked down a dark hallway. I peeked in an open door that was illuminated with light, and I gasped to see a man shaving in front of the mirror.

"Mornin' Heather," he said in an emotionless tone when he spotted me. I was too shocked to say anything, but luckily I was saved when the phone suddenly rang.

"Could you get it dear?" the man asked as he washed his face with a towel.

"Dear"? I thought. Just the sound of the word made my skin crawl. *I have a husband?* I followed the sound of the ring, and hesitantly picked up the phone. "H-hello?"

"Sabrina?!" an eager, familiar voice spoke. I recognized it to be mine right away, but this was too weird to be true. "This is you... isn't?" it continued. "This is your teacher... We need to get together. Meet me at my classroom before the morning bell rings."

Part 6: Mrs. Gwennett: I quickly speed-walked down the empty hallways of the school, and couldn't help but feel how unusual it was to be short. Then I saw my real body standing by the door to my classroom. Her reaction of seeing me was the same as mine. Neither could speak at first, and we weren't sure how to respond to this unusual... "situation."

"How did this happen?" Sabrina asked with my voice, breaking the silence.

"I have no idea, but if we want to switch back, we will have to learn how ourselves."

"That's impossible," said Sabrina, "We should wait until we're switched back naturally."

"But that will require us to go through the day as each other," I told her.



She looked at me with fear in her eyes. "You mean I would have to teach your classes?"

Before I answered, the morning bell rang, and students started walking into the hallways.

I looked up at my real body staring back at me nervously. "You can do it, trust me. Go to the second drawer in my metal cabinet to find my lesson plans. Where do you have first period?"

"In Mr. Lyman's room," she answered. "I have the rest of my schedule in my binder."

"Alright," I nodded. "Good luck Sabrina, I mean... Mrs. Gwennett." I called to her, then looked at her once more before I headed to the math hallway leaving her in charge of my job.

Part 7: Sabrina: I watched my teacher walk away going to where I was supposed to be going. I definitely did not feel confident about teaching. I entered her room and eventually found her lesson plans. I put a warm-up sheet on the overhead machine as tenth graders started came into the room.



Once the bell rang, and the morning announcements were finished, the entire class was seated quietly, looking at me with unusually straight faces. Their looks made me feel uneasy.

“Uh, hello everyone,” I barely said loud enough. “Um, go ahead and work on this.” I knew I sounded nothing like Mrs. Gwennett; even a boy looked at me with a curious, confused face. I stood in front of the class awkwardly for about two minutes as people were writing. I soon noticed a skinny girl in the second row with her head down staring into space.

“Uh, excuse me,” I said meekly to her. She lifted her head and glared at me. Her look made me shiver. “C-can you work on the warm-up please?” The girl stared at me like I was drunk and made a dramatic sigh, pulled out a messy binder, slapped it on her desk, and exaggerated her writing in front of me. *Uh... ok...* I thought. I took a deep breath. *This is going to be interesting.*

Part 8: Mrs. Gwennett: *Being a student should go perfectly well!* I thought as I took a seat in Tim Lyman's room. He wasn't in the room, but I did notice complicated math problems were written on the board for a warm-up. Then I realized that this was a trigonometry class; not my forte. I looked at the students around me, curious to see how motivated or unmotivated they acted without my apparent presence. My eyes widened when I saw a young man texting.

“Excuse me sir, put your phone away before I take it from you!” I demanded firmly. He stopped texting and stared at me unbelievably. The class stopped talking, causing an uncomfortable quietness to fill the air. I gasped at my mistake, and covered my mouth.



Then the majority of the class started laughing, and I pressed my hand against Sabrina's face. *My God, what have I done?* The mocks continued on until the teacher finally walked in.

“Sorry I took so long,” he said casually. “Any volunteers to solve the warm-up?” No one responded. “Seriously guys? We had three review days! Miss Kindler, would you come up?”

It took a moment for me to realize that he referred to me when he used Sabrina's last name. I hesitantly walked up to solve the problem, but looking at all the numbers and the sines and cosines made my brain cramp. I haven't done this in so long... and I knew I couldn't do it. So I turned to him and said, “I'm afraid I cannot solve this... sir.” A couple of people chuckled.

Tim Lyman looked at me with a questioning expression on his face. “Oh, that's... *fine*. I'm sorry, I thought you understood this already, but I guess I assumed wrong. You may return to your seat.”

“I do apologize,” I said, and I really meant it. I knew he probably had the confidence that Sabrina understood the work, but I made it appear his instructing hadn't affected her whatsoever. I heard even more giggling from the class, but Tim quieted it down.



Part 9: Sabrina: According to Mrs. Gwennett's planning notebooks, second period was a Shakespeare class. *Eww...* But I was delighted to see my friends Daniel, Liona, and Mandy walk into the classroom. I decided to pretend that I lost my memory, so I asked the class where we left off from yesterday. They told me they we were supposed to start working on Powerpoints in the library, so I told everyone to get up and stand at the door. Surprisingly, they actually obeyed! In the library, I watched my friends work. I really wanted to go talk to them, but I knew I

wasn't who I seemed to be. When their eyes met mine, I couldn't help but smile, but they would respond with either a surprised or disgusted expression. To them, I was just a strange, awkward teacher.

In third period, I was back in the room with a Research Seminar class of seniors. When a girl got up and started walking towards me, my heart started to pound. *She's going to ask a question!!*

"Mrs. Gwennett, I really don't know how to write this part without sounding like I'm preaching. I got these quotes, but they're from only one person's point of view." She pointed to the list. I skimmed through it, but I honestly didn't know what to say.

"Uh, you can try combining other peoples' opinions, I guess. I don't know," I answered.

She didn't seem very satisfied with my answer. In fact, she looked even more confused, especially with the way I spoke. "Oh, ok, but, I thought you would... well, never mind."

She folded her notes in half and looked at me curiously before turning to walk away. *Oh gosh, I was no help at all.* I looked at the clock. *Why do I have to go through this?*

Part 10: Mrs. Gwennett: I was in fourth period in a painting class. The radio played loudly, and Cindy Brice and her students would sometimes dance to the music. I couldn't help but ponder how bizarre this was.

"So Sabrina how was your day?" asked the girl next to me, who was painting a still life.

"Oh, I'm doing quite alright, thank you," I responded, staring at Sabrina's work.

Suddenly a former-student of mine named Allison, started laughing. "Guess what Veronica?" she said to the girl next to me. "I was texting Dan about you-know-what, and guess what he said!"

I looked over at her immediately. "You shouldn't have been texting during school," I said.

"Yeah I agree," said the girl named Veronica. "You could've easily got caught."

"Pffft," Allison chuckled. "I never do, and most teachers don't care anyway."

I looked at her once again, but this time with a glare. *Oh I think some do care- young lady.*

Allison went on. "I think you guys should text more often. Then you'll see how cool it is."

"I don't think so," Veronica said. "Sabrina, I know you agree with me, don't you?"

I thought about it, and concluded that I knew Sabrina well enough by now. "Of course I do."

Then the bell rang, and it was time for fifth period... where I would see the actual Sabrina.



Part 11: Sabrina: I waited for everyone to walk into the room, and at last saw the real English teacher walk in, inside my own body. She ran up to me immediately, instead of getting seated.

"Sabrina, there's a fight going on outside, and someone needs to take care of it, like a teacher." She pulled my arm, forcing me to walk with her to the two boys punching and kicking each other in the crowded hallway. I stood there in shock, but this was a problem for me to fix.



I took a deep breath and walked forward, seeing people stepping away as if I really was the strict Mrs. Gwennett. I focused my eyes on the boys, and I was going to be in control.

Then I stopped and yelled, "Enough!!" Suddenly most of the crowd quieted down.

I took hold of one of the boys and pulled him away. He said, "Woah, what'ya going to do?"

"I think," said a male voice from the down the hall, "that we're going to suspend you both." Everyone turned to see Mr. Zellinger the principal. "And I must say that fighting in front of Mrs. Gwennett's room was...well...a pretty stupid mistake." He then turned and grinned at me, which I never had seen him do before. "Thank you Mrs. Gwennett for stopping these clowns."

He took them away and told everyone to get to class, and as soon as Mrs. Gwennett and I were left in the hall, she came up to me and we hugged. "Good job," she whispered.

Then suddenly, a familiar strong tingling came over my entire body, and before I knew it, I was in the arms of the tall English teacher. I had at last returned to my own body.

"My gosh!" I laughed, hearing my young voice again. "I wasn't sure if I could stay being you."

Mrs. Gwennett laughed as well. "Sabrina, it's been years since I've been a student, and I thought it wouldn't be difficult to be one again, but I had forgotten about those challenges of high school."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "You're the one who has all the tough work!"

She shook her head. "My job can be tiresome and repetitive, and it disappoints me to see students who do not do as well as I hope. However," she paused with a sigh, "I learned that it's difficult and uncomfortable to be surrounded by individuals who have different respect for school and integrity." Then she whispered, "I believe that's what your poem was referring to?"

I was surprised. "Well, yeah, it was... but, you have to deal with misbehaving people too!"

Mrs. Gwennett smiled at me, and the bell rang. "Well, putting up with that is part of my job."

Part 12: Mrs. Gwennett: I was cleaning up the bedroom, pondering the unusual experiences of the day. I spotted the hand-held mirror I dropped the previous night, laying on the floor. I picked it up, and almost had forgotten how it had those strange African-stylized decorations. I didn't know why I bought it.

I smiled in gratitude to see my real face again in the glass, and then I tossed it in the trashcan.

Now I knew if ever I went in an exotic import store again, never to buy a strange mirror.



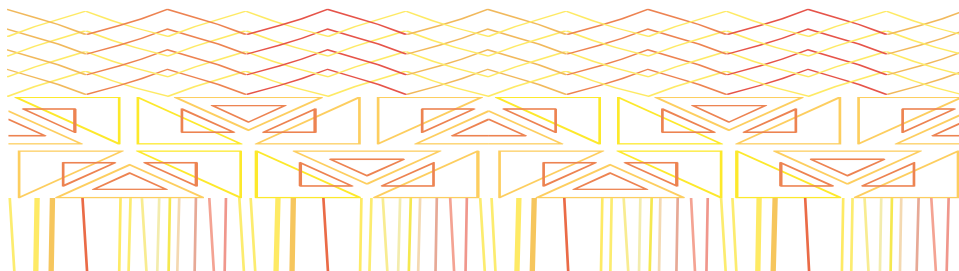
SHANA KEEGAN

Grade 11

Shane'a Mifflin, Teacher

Elkton High School

Cecil County Reading Council



Breath

Albert shuffled home through the snow as it leaked through his shoes, freezing his toes. The wind whipped harshly at his trench-coat, as he hugged it even tighter than before. He trudged his way home through the dark and bitter night, through the same dank streets, past the same stony buildings. No one else was about, that was certain. There was the occasional stranger on the street. However, none was important, because they didn't know him. In retrospect, none would even remember him and he certainly did not care enough to remember them.



He finally reached the staircase in the alley, bringing him down its cold steps to its subterranean passage, like an entrance into Hades. He gripped the frozen doorknob at the end of the narrow way and gave it a shove; the damn thing hadn't worked for years. He stepped into the hall that lay before him, the floor getting dusty and the corners gathering cobwebs. For he was rarely ever home anymore, and that stuff just was not as important anymore. It was dark. Dark and bitterly cold.

He went over to the mantle and got out a match. As he knelt over the hearth, he struck the match on the cold floor, creating a little spark of peace for his life. After the fire was lit, he made his way slowly to his arm chair and dragged it painstakingly over to the small flames that were building. He sat down, taking off his icy shoes to put his feet by the flames, but not bothering to remove his coat. In a world shaded in only black and white, the coldness of that around you is only amplified.

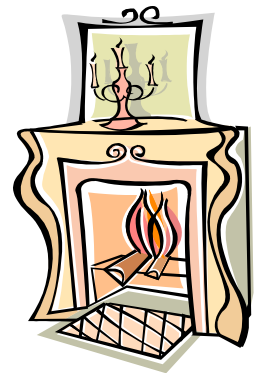
As the fire expanded, it only emphasized the darkness that lay behind him, hiding its wicked and sinister secrets. Albert sighed, running a hand through his white hair. "Is this what it's come to?" he thought, "Is this what I've worked for, for all my life? Have I struggled to sit alone, by myself, in this dark, dark house in a frigid and unloving metropolis of animosity?"

He drew a shaky breath as he remembered the days that were his past.

He remembered the restless breath of being a small child, running to meet his father after long day of work. Leaping into his arms, ignoring the dirt and grime of a hard days work, because none of that mattered, all that was important was that your family was whole, even if it was just for the evening. Together, at least until the next morning at daybreak when his father would trudge out again to work at the factory.

He remembered the anxious breath of a schoolboy anticipating a huge exam that hadn't been properly studied for, feeling the impending doom weighing down his mind with grief. The inhalation slowly trickling into his throat, as though rationing the oxygen would make you more focused.

He remembered the quick breaths of his wedding day. Or, possibly lack thereof. His nerves becoming a disaster on the most important day of his life as he struggled to breathe enough to remain conscious as he panted away in the sweltering heat and tried to keep himself from getting sick.





He remembered the hollow breath going through his body as he poured his soul out. He had never imagined losing a child, let alone the only product of so many years of trying and failing. Standing in that cold, cold hospital room as that doctor gave him the news like it wasn't that big of a deal. But it was a big deal; the doctor had just been numbed to impact over the years.

He remembered the understanding breath as he watched his wife's life fade before his eyes. The disease had been sweeping over her for months now, as it finally consumed her life, but he knew it was coming. It was of no surprise, so the shock was only emotional, not physical.

He inhaled, lighting his pipe with the same matches that he used to light the fireplace. Life was nothing. Like drinking, it started out good and only went downhill from there. Childhood is the apex of your life, and only as you learn more and more about the world, the more and more you realize the treachery of the world. The more light that shines on you, the more you notice the darkness around you. Just like now, as he sat alone in the dark with the flames dancing in front of his face.

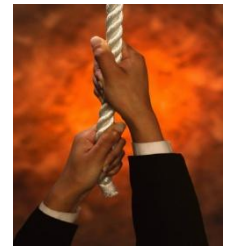


Despite all these things, he had had a great life. He had accomplished things. He had found love. He had impacted those around him. But it didn't matter. Everyone did that. When you look at the long timeline of human history, you realize that people never remember those that were average, like him. He was just a place-filler in the world for his sixty-seven years.



He stood up and slowly climbed on top of his chair, ignoring the arthritis that plagued his back.

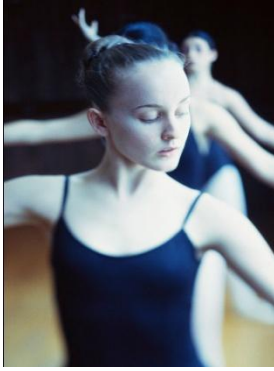
He took a breath - his last breath as he slipped the rope around his neck and let go.



JOHN LAMBERTSON
Grade 12
Shawn Simms, Teacher
Westminster High School
Carroll County Reading Council

Essay / Short Story Second Place Winners





The First Saturday of December

I was trying to keep happy thoughts running through my mind. I was trying to forget about my ripped tights, my pulsing ankle, and trying to pretend like I didn't notice their snobby glares. I waited quietly in the wings. My eyes were closed the whole time. I didn't open them, not once. I could feel the vibration from the clapping under my feet. Glitter and Perfection just ran past me jumping up and down screaming, "We nailed it!" There wasn't much I could say.

It was the first Saturday of December. It was hailing and snowing, the first omen; I was almost run over by a white Lexus, the second; and last but not least, a piece of barbed wire got stuck onto my jeans and ripped right through to my tights. I honestly wanted to go back home. I doubted myself, and I knew they doubted me. That was the ultimate recipe for failure. Doubt with a touch of doubt, delicious. They all screamed and fought while I stared as if I didn't know what was going on. The girls used words fancier than their Baryshnikovs. Their leotards had patterns that looked like the night sky. They glistened as they moved, almost like hairography, only for a leotard. I didn't have any fancy playoffs of the uniform. I wore what was required, the bare minimum. All I had was the bare minimum.

I felt the whole waiting room shake with each tick of the clock. The hands were the silky ribbons of the ballet shoe, flowing out like a cursive M. Someone once said that the one who does not try has no advantage over the one who can't at all, or it was just printed off on a fortune cookie, whichever. Well, that cookie quote had been ringing in my head ever since the night at the Chinese restaurant. I was looking at the new dance schedule. Company C just stood out to me. It required Pointe and lyrical--both of which were words I could not pronounce. Then, the miniature versions of myself that live in my mind started whispering, "Do Company C," to the tune of the restaurant's music. They wouldn't stop! It was like "Party in the USA" was playing. The whole time you are thinking *Why on Earth am I listening to this?* Yet you're not hitting next; you're singing along.



Springing back out of my flashback, one of girls moved next to me. She said, "You're that girl that does ballet but not Company C." It was adorable; it really was. It turns out the girl sitting next to me was the youngest in the whole company. She told me some very interesting stories of new girls messing up, falling, breaking their arms, and crying after the first day. It brought comfort upon me and a feeling of everything's going to be okay. It was then that I grabbed four pieces of gum to chew at once and started rocking back and forth in my seat.

I had to admit I was nervous. I was shaking. Then, just like in the horror movies, the door started to creak. A light came from the ever-growing opening, and a shadow emerged from the door. I covered my eyes with a slight space between my pointer and middle finger. Then a very crackly voice hissed, "Class is starting now." I slowly eased up, and my whole life flashed before my eyes as I was trampled by what seemed as though thousands of ballerinas. There was a yellow dust filling the air coming off of the scratch on their ballet shoes.

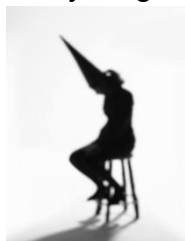
After recovering from my near-death experience, I made my way into the studio. Everyone was in line tallest to shortest. Finding my place was easy. I was the shortest. Epic fail: zero. Fortune cookie: one.



Then the teacher had us all introduce ourselves since there were, clearly, new students. Having students with these names, I wouldn't be surprised if they were royalty: Antoinette, Geneviève, Charles. My name is French, but not that French. It wasn't until it was my turn that I drew a blank. I couldn't believe I hesitated on my own name. The score was now one to one. I think the category for epic fail had an unfair advantage over fortune cookie. After doing bar work and floor stretches, we went across the floor. I was lucky to have the best students, who I accordingly named Glitter and Perfection in front of me, so that I knew whatever the teacher was saying to do. As the music stopped, all the miniature versions of me sighed and put a giant tally mark under fortune cookie.

We then had to spread out and learn a few eight counts. Eight, from that day on, was my least favorite number. Each count seemed longer than the next, each move harder than the one before. The miniature versions of me were biting their nails and panicking as much as I was. Then, the words I feared most came out of the teacher's mouth: "We will be performing solos." I died on the inside. As if all chances of love were lost. I had turned to stone and then shattered into a million pieces. Then just as I was starting to put myself back together, my name was called.

With a deep breath I said, "Here goes nothing." The music began to play, and I began to move. Chaîné after chaîné, pas de chat grand to bores, I felt like I had it. Maybe Company C was for me. Maybe the day in the Chinese restaurant was all a part of a larger plan! What if Pointe was my calling? Everything I've ever worked for and dreamt of ends right here right now!



My self-recognition speech was amazing. I wished everyone could've heard it. Sadly, it was never finished for I had fallen right into the mirror... face first.

I believe epic fail won that day. It was a long, cold walk home.



DOMINIQUE OVERMAN

Grade 9

Shirley Faulkner, Teacher

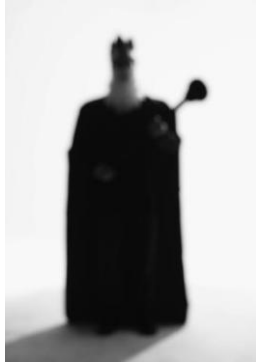
Aberdeen High School Science and Math Academy

Harford County Reading Council

Her Final Story

Kayla stared at the paper in front of her thoughtfully, eyes slightly unfocused. Her pencil tapped the sheet lightly as she considered what to write for the short story contest. Last year, she had gotten a small “Honorable Mention” ribbon, but this year, her parents were determined for her to place higher. She sighed and rubbed her eyes tiredly, already questioning her commitment.

“Focus,” she murmured to herself sternly. She didn’t want to face her parents’ disappointment or frustration due to her lack of motivation. Quickly, Kayla began to write, the words flowing from her pencil haltingly.



“Once upon a time,” the old storyteller began in a voice low and alluring, “long, long ago, in a land of ancient wars and eclipsed suns, there was an old king who ruled a dark, battle-torn nation known as Thalishgrothe, loosely translated from the old tongue to mean ‘thrashing stag’. The king’s once-proud shoulders were slumped by age, his eyes sunken, his face thin and crumpled. He was hailed Braydin the Bold, for in his prime, he had been quite the warrior, but now, many years later, he was dying, afflicted by a terrible wasting disease.

“Braydin had five grown sons, and each yearned to be the next ruler of Thalishgrothe. But it was the eldest, Prince Thurnred, whom was named as heir to the throne. When it came time for Braydin to die, Thurnred was given an ancient sword as a final gift from his father. It was said that this sword was wielded by only the true monarch of the kingdom.

“Thurnred was a cunning, ruthless king, and he sent all four of his brothers to command his massive army, which was busy fighting a long and bloody war with Sohurnia, a country to the south. Thurnred scorned the traditions of his ancestors and didn’t believe in the power of his father’s gift, and so he made a grave error by gambling away the sword, ignorant of its true value...”

Kayla stopped and carefully reread over what she had written so far, correcting a few spelling mistakes. She grimaced and grumbled to herself, “No, it doesn’t sound very original. Too many people write about war, kings, and legendary swords. Why does writing have to be so difficult? My parents can’t honestly believe that I can win this contest.”

Kayla laid the paper in a pile on her desk, which bore the label “To be Finished...” She glanced at the tall, untidy stack somewhat sheepishly, but retrieved a blank piece of notebook paper and began to write anew.

In the middle of the ocean, there is a small crescent-moon shaped island. No human or elf has ever set foot on it and a ring of heavy mists shields it from inquisitive ships. Sea birds circle its sky in small, wheeling flocks and the calm, bright cerulean sea teems with schools of colorful fish. The restless waves lap gently at the island’s shores and streams chortle merrily as they wind through the undergrowth.



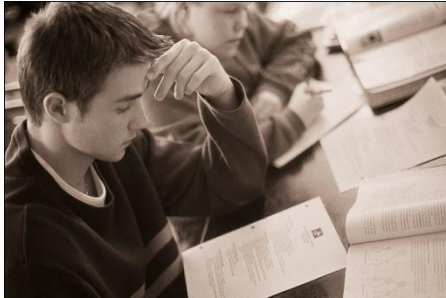
The island is mostly covered in bright tropical forests that burst with fragrant blossoms and a variety of sounds. It is edged with stretches of white undisturbed sand; shells glitter under the sun and small clusters of black rocks hug the shoreline. A light breeze caresses the island continuously, bearing the sweet scent of fruit, and makes its way through the hidden paths that are known only to the winds.

At the island’s highest point is a gaping crater that leads deep into the belly of the earth. The single volcano stands in the middle of the crescent defiantly, lording over the island like a self-appointed monarch. No creature has scaled its steep slopes; no bird dares to nest on.

its narrow cliffs. Thus, no animal had ever stumbled across the volcano's greatest secret, its raison d'être.

Unbeknownst to any, a dragon egg was located deep in the heart of the jagged volcano. A perfect, unblemished sphere, it shimmered with unmatched beauty in the fiery light of the molten magma. Iridescent shades of pale green, metallic turquoise, and bright pink flitted across the radiant surface of the shell, as if it were a giant pearl. Inside the breathtaking beauty of the egg, a power unlike any other was being born.

Kayla swept back the long black hair that was threatening to spill into her face and considered this most recent fragment. It wasn't bad, but she doubted that she could satisfactorily fit its entire plot into only three pages. She pushed it to one side and began to write a different story, her words flowing more and more easily.



"Andrew!" Mr. Lentine's voice was sharp and impatient as he called the boy's name for the third time. Andrew quickly shut the book that he was reading under the desk, and looked up, disoriented. A complicated math problem on the board caught his attention and he quickly solved it in his head.

"Thirty-six," he said confidently. Mr. Lentine sighed as the rest of the class broke out in stifled laughter and smiles of amusement.

"Yes, Andrew, the answer to that problem is thirty-six, but the question was if you were enjoying that book you are attempting to hide from me," Mr. Lentine said dryly. Andrew felt his face grow hot and he glanced down at his desk guiltily.

"Give me the book," Mr. Lentine commanded, holding out his hand from the front of the room. Andrew obeyed reluctantly, getting up from his desk and walking up to the teacher. His classmates stared, some sympathetic, others mocking and delighted at his misfortune.

"Tough luck, dude," Troy whispered with a snicker as he passed by. Andrew ignored him and continued to walk forward.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lentine," Andrew apologized as he drew near. He handed the book to the teacher, trying to look sincere.

"See me after class, Andrew," Mr. Lentine ordered with a slight frown.

Kayla smirked slightly as she read what she had written. She loved books and had almost been caught reading during class at least twice in the past. However, the story seemed so mundane. It didn't have a very captivating story line, if one at all, and so she determinedly started a new literary composition. Kayla was beginning to enjoy herself as she discovered the power of her words. Sentences streamed in delicate cascades from her head to her hand as she tapped into her imagination.

Antinias gazed at his army with fire burning in his eyes. His impressive dark mane rippled as he spoke and his tawny fur gleamed like metal under the bright afternoon sun.

"The enemy outnumbers us. Their warriors are fierce, swift, and strong," he rumbled, power vibrating from deep within his chest. "But they cannot hope to match the power of our warriors or the might of our courage! It is time for them to be defeated!"

He leapt around to face the direction of the opposing army, his head raised majestically. Drawing back his lips, he let out a tremendous roar. His warriors answered him, their ear-shattering response drowning out his roar. Tigers and lions snarled, wolves threw back their heads and howled, horses whinnied, foxes yelped and barked, the raptors circling in the sky shrieked, deer shook their magnificent antlers, bears growled, lynxes



and bobcats yowled, and boars grunted and waved their sharp tusks. Feeling invigorated, the horde of animals dispersed, the regiments forming a half-circle around the command area.



Tymbral stepped forward, muzzle quirking in a savage grin. He stopped by the side of Antinias, his dark rough fur a great contrast to the lion's pale, smooth coat.

"The sun is shining bright. It is a good day to die," he growled quietly to Antinias. The lion inclined his head regally, golden eyes glinting in amusement.

"Only a dire wolf would say such a thing, my friend," Antinias purred. "I speak for the rest of us when I say that it is a good day for battle." Tymbral barked out laughter. His green eyes glowed.

"I only meant that we dire wolves are prepared to end our lives fighting for following generations to be touched by light instead of the brewing darkness," he responded cheerfully. "I will remind you that not all of my kind is as endearingly lighthearted as I." Antinias smiled and turned as a small red fox trotted toward them.

"Darius, what message do you bring?" the lion asked. The fox bowed low.

"My lords Antinias and Tymbral," he greeted respectfully. "The ranks are ready, at your command." The lion sighed and looked across the battleground at the enemy army. His eyes darkened.

"Not all of us will leave this battle, Tymbral," Antinias stated sadly. "I do not know if I have the strength to lead so many to their deaths." The dire wolf bristled, glaring at the lion and glancing meaningfully at the attending fox.

"Darius, thank you for the message. You are dismissed now," Tymbral instructed the fox. He added darkly, "Not a word to anyone what you have heard." Darius bowed his head in acquiescence.

"You have my silence, my lords," he promised as he loped away. When the fox left, Tymbral turned on Antinias angrily, his eyes chips of green ice.

"Antinias, what are you thinking?" the dire wolf snarled. "You mustn't show weakness in front of those you lead! You are their commander, Antinias; if you betray any doubt, this army will crumble!" The lion growled dangerously, his ears flattening at the sharp rebuke.

"It is not your place to reprimand me, wolf," he hissed.

"Some beast had to do it," Tymbral retorted belligerently. Antinias stiffened, sinking his claws into the ground as he struggled to rein in his temper.

Kayla stopped abruptly, amazed at how easily the words came to her now. The idea for her contest story suddenly came to her, inspiration igniting as bright as a dying star. Kayla's smile brimmed with happy confidence as she turned her attention to her last piece of paper and began to write a story of beginnings and creativity, of new discoveries and burgeoning promise.

The pencil wrote with strong, self-assured strokes as she unfolded her final story.

Kayla stared at the paper in front of her thoughtfully...



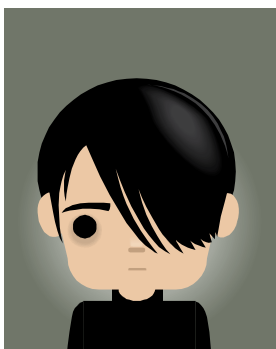
HANNAH CLIPP

Grade 10

Shirley Faulkner, Teacher

**Aberdeen High School Science and Math Academy
Harford County Reading Council**

Nameless



"He is dumb."
"He's an idiot."
"He can't write."
"He's a nobody."

A doctor once said that I'm autistic. Another said that I have mental problems "that emulate ADHD in an unusual DAN position". Yet another said that it's a simple case of low IQ. A few said it's a simple matter of "self-confidence." A psychiatrist said I'm too scared to try.

My classmates all say I'm retarded.

Retard. It's a name that followed me a lot, across the eight, short, miserable years of my life. In most places, it's probably a case of sympathy, of kind old ladies giving you cookies and short awkward pauses(quickly filled) when you do something wrong(or at least that's how I see it in movies). In a neighborhood as intolerant as mine, that is practically a death sentence. Nonetheless, I just put on my blue backpack, carry my black notebook, and trudge on.

"Hey, retard!" My reverie was interrupted by Matt, a bully if there ever was one. He gets out of trouble by the teachers, of course, by acting like Mr. Nice Person.

"Whatcha got there, dingbat?" He snatched my notebook before I had a chance to reply and held his arms up, outside my reach. I tried to grab it and shouted, "Gimme!" He laughed and threw it to one of his friends, beginning a game of "monkey" that pauses once in a while for them to read out an embarrassing line.

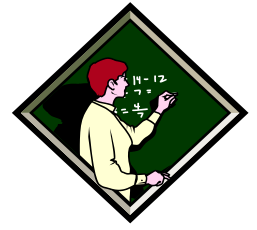


"He can't even spell rap! R...U...P" one guy said with humiliating slowness. Their game stopped when the administrator came from the building onto the playground. I snatched it back, my eyes burning with anger and hate (I was *not* crying! I'm just allergic).



The bell rang then, and we went into the yellow brick school. Our science teacher (first class) taught us how predators and prey develop and co-evolve. Predators develop claws, six-inch teeth, brute strength, and cunning so that they could feed. Prey develop speed, camouflage, or they go out in groups; occasionally they'll have horns or tusks to fight off their hunters. (There were even, surprisingly enough, some carnivorous plants). I thought I got it but I didn't raise my hand, afraid somebody would shout me down as a retard.

We then had math, which was very complicated (we were adding fractions). Sometime halfway through the class, I heard a few girls, whispering. From snatches of their conversation, I learned that Bill was suspended; nobody knows why; he did something bad; he wouldn't admit it. I was glad. Bill laughed at me all the time and even hit me when he was mad. I was happy through the rest of that class.



We then had English, which was pure torture. The teacher always asked me questions, saying that I should know if I put my mind to it. Meanwhile, Matt led the class in laughing at me, all the while sounding innocent. I tuned them out. The girls were gossiping again; Mary was showing off her phone. I grew bored after a while and wrote in my notebook.



We had gym after, which was worse. I couldn't catch a ball; throw the Frisbee, any of the normal things normal kids do, so I got teased a lot. Matt really got into insulting me, saying I was a good for nothing and a _____ and a _____."

We then went to lunch. On the way, I had to go back to class to get my lunch money. Tim made a crack that made my face burn.

When I got there, the lines were full, so I had to wait a long time. On the way, Matt was summoned to the main office. "Probably an early dismissal," a guy said, jealous. I waited until it was my turn, then ordered ham and cheese.

I sat down at my class' lunch table, ignoring the jeers and catcalls to the best of my ability. I couldn't take it after a while, and moved to the teacher's table. Mrs. Smith was supposed to mentor me, but she seemed distracted. I opened my notebook.

"He was such a nice boy," she said, more to herself than me.

I shrugged and started writing.

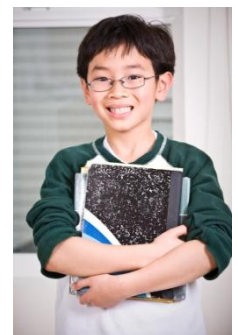
"Can't believe it of Matthew Goodall" she said.

I turned my notebook to page 57, away from prying eyes, and drank some milk, directly from the carton.

"So sad that he got suspended. How could a nice boy like Matt ever steal a phone?"

I scrolled halfway down my list, glad that my work's finished for the day. Slowly, carefully, I crossed out two words: ~~Mat Goodel~~.

"Venus fly-trap," I said, and walked to the trash bin, leaving the teacher to shake her head in pity at the retarded child.



LINCHUAN ZHANG

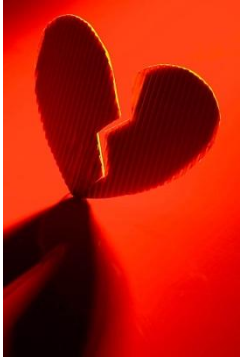
Grade 11

Danielle Sinclitico, Teacher

Eleanor Roosevelt High School

Prince George's County Reading Council

You



I don't exactly remember how it got to this point. High running emotions can do that to a man. Right now I'm out of breath and you're walking out the door threatening never to come back. Nothing I say is stopping you. When you're like this you're worse than any woman. No woman can stay mad as long as you can.

Our relationship is complicated. One can never judge us by a first glance, though they do so more often than either of us is comfortable with. They call us lovers, but for us, that term is too simple. One word is not able to describe what we are to each other. At our worst we're horrible enemies, two strangers in the same room, hell brought to earth.

Screaming, and cussing, nothing is held back. At our best, we're inseparable, one soul in two bodies. No two people could love each other more than we love each other.

But I guess all relationships are like that, veritable roller coasters. It drives me crazy more often than not, but what else can I expect? Despite how I act and what I say, you are the man I love.

And therein lies our deepest problem. Our relationship is not publicly acceptable. Apparently what we have is forbidden, no matter what we say to protest this unfair claim. We are not allowed to love one another. But that does not stop us, oh no. It never will. Because love, in its purest form, has no rules. So who are they to say what we have is wrong? Who are they to say we're not allowed to be together? Who are they to intrude on something so deep, they themselves cannot comprehend it?

But right now, at this very second, there is nothing but heartbreak permeating the room. You're gone now, and I'm alone. I never knew that being alone, in a house that I know, could feel so....empty. I've never been this empty...You were always here beside me, brightening up my day, making life worthwhile. What am I to do now that you're no longer here? I need you. I need you more than I've ever needed anyone. Why did I have to say all those awful things to you? I'm so, so terribly sorry for that. But I can't take them back now, and going after you would be nothing but a fool's errand. Would do nothing but add fuel to the fire. You're in no mood to listen to my begging; I pushed too far this time, and you reacted. This is what I deserve, but the "what ifs", and "how comes" haunt me. They circle around in my head until I slide to the floor and scream my agony to the still air of the house. Somewhere in the back of my mind I wonder if you can feel my pain, hear my screams...But I know you're too far away for that. Besides, I was the one who chased you away in the first place.

All you wanted to do was defy all the rules they cast upon us to keep us quiet and tame. To show everyone that love is no different between two people of the same sex. You wanted to prove to them all that we're natural, that we're not evil, or cursed. You wanted to go against the grain, be able to walk down a crowded street hand in hand without being avoided or hissed at. You wanted to take a stand for all that you believed was right, and with your gentle smile, and caring eyes, you held out your hand for me to join you in this 'quest'.



And I refused, I doubted you in the moment you really needed me to back you up. In that simple refusal your entire dreams crumpled at my feet. All because I was too stubborn to believe that with a little effort, we could become accepted. I told you that it was a stupid plan, that it would never work. I tried to convince you to see my way, that everyone else would NEVER accept us. We were too different, and different would always be outcasts, nothing would ever change that. I tore up your hopes and threw them down. Little did I realize your heart was also among those scattered pieces.

It took me longer than it should have to realize that you were crying, that silent tears were making rivers down your face. You never made a sound, not once during my entire rant. Even now the tears are silent, and that's what struck me the most. You were NEVER quiet. That's what I loved the most about you, you always said what was on your mind. But not now, no. You just stared at me, your hazel eyes piercing mine, making my soul ache.

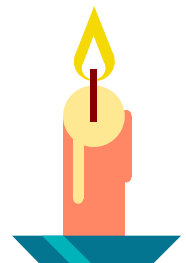


I opened my mouth to try to fix what I had done, but you had already turned away, a mumbled apology on your lips. You headed for the door and I jumped after you, trying to explain myself, and that's when you lost it. Screaming at me for being so stupid and not trusting you enough to take this one risk. That maybe everyone else was right and we weren't supposed to be together. That one small comment defied every argument that I could have ever thought up, and I watched in stunned silence as you stormed out the door, leaving me where I am now: on my knees, beating the floor, as if it would make some difference.

My tears started to stream then, as I tried to figure out what I was going to do, why I had to be so closed minded. I lay on that floor for a long while. Even after my tears had dried up, only leaving the salt tracks, I stayed there. I stayed until I no longer knew what time it was, until the sun set and the moon rose to cast a sickening gleam across my gloomy face, until all my body parts had grown numb. Then, I moved. I moved slowly, dragging my limbs under me and heaving myself up into a standing position. From there I stumbled, listing sharply to the right, into the kitchen and to my cell phone, grabbing it and calling your number in a desperate attempt that maybe you'd answer.

You didn't. And I knew you weren't going to, you would come back only when you wanted to, and it wrecked havoc on me to wait for that day. But for that day I would wait. I would wait lifetimes for it. As I know you would for me. At least I still think that's true. I'm not exactly sure of anything anymore. I don't think clearly without you, but we've already been through that, haven't we?

A small candle catches my attention, and I walk over to it like a man possessed. I recognize it, of course. It smells like a sweet evergreen tree, your favorite, mine too, even though I always had a fondness for peaches. But anything you liked I was helpless not to fall in love with as well. It was just how much joy you showed in everything that drew me in, until I was captive in your little world. Your helpless slave. I've never seen a smile as bright as yours. And I begin to cry again. No tears, for they have been all dried up, but the sobs wrack my body and collapse my legs. I fall against the table, face to face with that little candle, which I cradle close. A brief thought about no man ever crying this much passes through my brain, but it is cast aside. No one was here to call

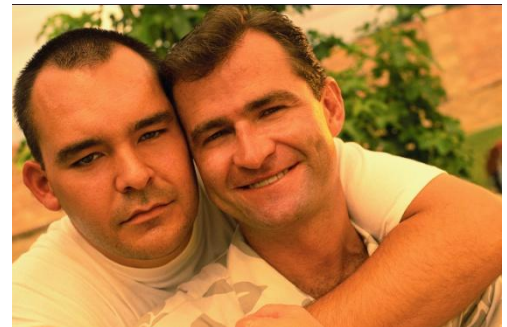


me out on being so emotional, so I could cry as much as I wanted to. To that plan I stuck true. I cried until I passed out from exhaustion, that candle still giving off its sweet perfume, and memories of you crowding my brain.



I woke up feeling warm, comfortable, and very confused. I was in my bed, wearing only a clean pair of shorts. The afternoon sun glazed through my window and made what happened last night come back to me in one huge flood. I scrambled out of bed and rushed into the kitchen hoping, praying that you were there. And you were, you were sitting at the table sipping a cup of coffee and working on a Sudoku puzzle. I nearly laughed in relief, but instead I began to cry again. You're here! You're here!!! You are back!

You looked up at me the moment I began stumbling over to you, and as I tripped over my own feet you leapt out of the chair and met me on the floor, both of us one huge heap of tangled limbs. You began to panic, but I was too relieved to do anything but cry and hug you fiercely. You calmed when you realized that I was okay, and began to berate me about how stupid I was to go off the deep end like I did last night. I barely listened, just hugged you tighter and reveled in feeling your warm body and hearing your heart beat against my ear. You shook me suddenly, shouting three words that made me freeze. You were shouting that you forgave me, that you loved me. I choked on my sobs and looked into your eyes. Your gaze was firm as you softly repeated those two phrases over and over until I had stopped crying and was able to respond back. I confessed my love for you. I started softly, but ended up shouting it to your face. You shut me up with two words. With those two words the world righted itself magically and I found that I could breathe again. "I know," you said, "I know."



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